

HOW TO AVOID PLAGIARISM

Plagiarism is considered a serious offence in the academic world. And, if you recognize that it involves, in essence, stealing someone else's ideas and making them your own, it's easier to understand why. Today, what with plagiarism checking software, it's not hard to locate. Luckily, it's also easy to avoid – as long as you know what it is.

The referencing style used in the examples given here is APA. Other referencing styles use different formats, but the general ideas provided remain the same. For more information on referencing styles, have a look at “**How to reference**” in this series.

■ What is plagiarism?

▶ Using specific words and phrases, i.e., copy and paste

If you take words, a phrase or a few sentences word for word from an author, and don't place them within “quotation marks” *and* provide a citation (including the page number (or paragraph number for APA style) of where the word or phrase was in the original text), this is plagiarism, **verbatim**. This copy and paste handiwork is particularly easy to spot. However, don't think you can get away with simply changing an odd word here or there while keeping the same structure and general language: this is known as **mosaic** plagiarism.

This also includes taking material from *your own* previous work: you can't simply copy and paste from an old essay or thesis that has already been marked, and attempt to pass it off as new (especially if your present professor was the one who graded it before).

▶ Using information and ideas

Even if you use your own words – **paraphrase** –, when you use someone else's ideas, concepts, methods, theories, etc., you must cite the author(s). Otherwise, this is plagiarism: you've still taken someone else's ideas and put them forward as your own.

■ What isn't plagiarism?

▶ General common knowledge

If you use facts that are well-known, be it geographical, political or historical information that is common knowledge in the public domain, you don't need to provide a source. This includes, for instance, that the Battle of Hastings took place in 1066, or that Germany is part of Europe.

▶ Field-specific common knowledge

This is knowledge that is well-known within the field in which you're writing, for instance, a particular economic theory or scientific method. However, you need to be sure that this information is, in fact, commonly understood by your readers. You can check this with your professor or supervisor if you're unsure.

Still unclear as to what plagiarism is? Check out the examples below...

■ Examples of what is (and what isn't) plagiarism

You're given the following as an essay title:

“Food and nutrition security: the importance and challenges of smallholder agriculture”

You find a relevant paper published by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and read this paragraph on page 2 of the brief:

“Almost three quarters of the extreme poor live in rural areas of developing countries, and most poor rural people base their livelihoods on agriculture. However, smallholder agriculture is not equivalent to poverty.”

Source: IFAD (2015) Investing in smallholder family agriculture for global food security and nutrition. IFAD Post-2015 Policy Brief 3. IFAD, Rome.

How do you decide to use it?

Scenario 1: you decide it's so well-written, you simply couldn't do a better job of wording it and so you copy and paste it from the document.

First attempt:

Almost three quarters of the extreme poor live in rural areas of developing countries, and most poor rural people base their livelihoods on agriculture. However, smallholder agriculture is not equivalent to poverty.

PLAGIARIZED: no quotation marks, no citation.

Second attempt:

Almost three quarters of the extreme poor live in rural areas of developing countries, and most poor rural people base their livelihoods on agriculture. However, smallholder agriculture is not equivalent to poverty (IFAD, 2015).

PLAGIARIZED: a citation is given, but no quotation marks have been provided, making the reader think that you used your own words.

Third attempt:

“Almost three quarters of the extreme poor live in rural areas of developing countries, and most poor rural people base their livelihoods on agriculture. However, smallholder agriculture is not equivalent to poverty.” (IFAD, 2015).

This is better. BUT: the page number was not included.

Fourth attempt:

“Almost three quarters of the extreme poor live in rural areas of developing countries, and most poor rural people base their livelihoods on agriculture. However, smallholder agriculture is not equivalent to poverty” (IFAD, 2015, p. 2).

PERFECT: the citation includes the author, publication year, and page number

Scenario 2: you decide that you don’t want to present this as a whole quote, and so will paraphrase the text instead.

First attempt:

As an IFAD (2015) report states, almost three quarters of the very poor live in rural areas of developing countries, and a lot of poor rural people base their livelihoods on agriculture. But, smallholder agriculture is not equivalent to poverty.

PLAGIARIZED: only a few words have been changed. If you think you’re being clever by choosing this lazy option then be warned: this will appear in plagiarism software as foul play.

Second attempt:

In developing countries, the majority of the very poor – approximately three quarters – reside in rural regions; most of these people rely on agriculture for their livelihoods. However, this does not mean that to be a smallholder is synonymous to being poor.

PLAGIARIZED: the text has been paraphrased, but there’s no citation provided.

Third attempt:

In developing countries, the majority of the very poor – approximately three quarters – reside in rural regions; most of these people rely on agriculture for their livelihoods. However, this does not mean that to be a smallholder is synonymous to being poor (IFAD, 2015).

PLAGIARIZED: the text has been paraphrased and a citation added, but the citation is only present at the end of the paragraph. Therefore, a reader could assume that the citation only refers to the last sentence.

Fourth attempt:

In developing countries, the majority of the very poor – approximately three quarters – reside in rural regions; most of these people rely on agriculture for their livelihoods (IFAD, 2015). However, this does not mean that to be a smallholder is synonymous to being poor (IFAD, 2015).

PERFECT: it’s now clear what has been sourced.

Fifth attempt:







As an IFAD (2015) brief reports, in developing countries, the majority of the very poor – approximately three quarters – reside in rural regions; most of these people rely on agriculture for their livelihoods. However, this does not mean that to be a smallholder is synonymous to being poor.

EVEN BETTER: if you want to take a lot of information from one source, you can simply introduce the paragraph or section as coming from this source, e.g., “According to...” or “As explained in a report published by...”. Providing a citation after every paragraph can make your writing look rather untidy.

■ In-text citations

In order to avoid plagiarism, it's important to recognize when you need to include the citation of a source within the text. As highlighted earlier, it's not always necessary to do so.

The following table provides a list of different scenarios you may come across during your writing, and indicates whether or not you need to provide an in-text citation.

Scenario	Yes, you should	No need to
You write about an idea you've had or a theory you came up with		
You write about someone else's idea or theory, but you paraphrase it		
You use figures from a source in order to back up your argument		
You decide to directly quote a sentence from a source		
You find an interesting diagram on a website and decide to use it		
You create a table using data you found through your own research		
You use a fact that is common knowledge		